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Religious Identity and Religious Belief: The Subconscious Religiosity of Chinese University Students

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This thesis will explore the question of what the literature says about religion in China, the beliefs of DePauw students, and their religious practices. I will argue that, as the literature suggests, many Chinese students do not self-identify as religious, but have beliefs associated with traditional Chinese religions. The existing literature will be supported from findings in student interviews that provide evidence that many students say they do not have a religion, but believe in religious elements such as karma, or have participated in religious activities such as ancestor worship. I then will argue the reason for this disconnect can be explained by analyzing the impact of early Chinese scholars whose writings were influenced by the Western influence of the term "religion" as well as the pressure to modernize through secularization. Furthermore, I will demonstrate that a psychological analysis allows us to understand how religious elements have become embedded into Chinese culture, and therefore embedded into the average Chinese psyche. Finally, I will argue that the interconnected nature of traditional Chinese religions is an important component of why individuals do not typically associate with one specific religious tradition. Overall, this thesis will argue that these elements combined have influenced the low rate of religious self-identification and the common phenomenon that individuals say they do not have a religion yet believe in religious elements or have participated in religious practices. Before presenting these findings, I will provide a historical and political background about religion in China. Chinese religion's historical and political past have led many scholars and data collection organizations to assume that China is full of irreligious people. In order to debunk the myth of irreligion in China, I will first present the case as to why individuals have concluded Chinese people have no religion, and I will argue that this conclusion is wrong by discussing the current literature. Finally, I will further support the debunking of this myth of irreligiosity with data collected from student interviews.

Academic studies that focus solely on Chinese student religiosity are sparse. However, one survey in particular conducted by Fenggang Yang of Purdue University is the most comprehensive and thorough study of Chinese international student religious beliefs and practices. As part of Purdue's Center on Religion and Chinese Society, Yang and his team have conducted two major studies, one in 2016 and one in 2018. While the surveys also include questions about how Chinese students perceive democracy in the United States or their social media use, a large portion of his findings are regarding the religious beliefs and practices of Chinese international students at Purdue. Since his study is the most recent and thorough survey of this specific group of individuals, it was in great part an inspiration for this thesis and provided avenues for further investigation. The goal of this thesis is to provide a historical and political background to the religious situation in China, while analyzing the relationship between DePauw student interviewees' religious self-identify, the beliefs they hold, and the practices in which they engage. In order to do so, students were asked both about their beliefs *and* practices to further understand their complex relationship. Furthermore, as a means of further understanding the influence of the Chinese government's atheist political stance, I asked students what they remember learning about religion in school. This allowed me to negotiate the difference between the government's stance on religion versus a slightly more tolerant attitude in the classroom. Yang's study provides crucial numbers about Chinese student religiosity, but due to the statistical nature of the study, we are not able to understand the underlying reasons why students may respond the way they did. Consequently, the intent of this thesis is to understand the cultural context in which these Chinese students were raised as well as an attempt to gain a deeper understanding of the Chinese youth psyche. By conducting interviews, I was able to compare student responses to the existing literature and found that many responses directly

supported the findings of previous studies. Finally, I found there is a wide range of explanations for student responses, including a historical and political approach, a psychological approach, and a cultural analysis.

This thesis, while including a discussion of the religious beliefs of the wider Chinese population, focuses on youth, and more specifically on Chinese university students. As will be further discussed, Chinese youth are a critical group to study because they were raised in a new environment that has been understudied. Statistics collected by scholars Stark and Liu highlight the increased number of religious reporters in the early 2000s. An analysis of these findings demonstrates that it is not possible for a huge number of converts to explain this phenomenon, but rather a change in social stigma that caused more people to be comfortable reporting their religious beliefs. Chinese youth were raised in the social environment that did not have such a negative stigma against religion, so their attitudes towards religion may be very different from earlier generations. Since the attitudes and beliefs of Chinese youth are underrepresented, we do not have a full understanding of how the changing social environment has impacted the beliefs and opinions of Chinese university students. For these reasons, the experience and beliefs of Chinese youth are very important as they contribute to the larger discussion of Chinese religion.

HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL BACKGROUND OF CHINESE RELIGION

The following section will provide a background of major historical and political events and ideologies that have shaped the modern religious environment in China. To understand fully why the Chinese religious environment is typically perceived as atheist or irreligious, we must first understand the historical and political factors at play. Over the past hundred years, China has had a tumultuous relationship with religion, which impacted many Chinese people's attitudes

toward religion and the government's political stance toward religion. To add to the complex nature of religion in China today, we must also understand China's long history of religion and the impact of these religions on Chinese culture. By evaluating history, politics, and traditional Chinese religions, we will more deeply understand the current religious climate in China.

THE RELIGIOUS SITUATION IN CHINA

China is one of the oldest civilizations on Earth with more than 4,000 years of recorded history. Officially known as the People's Republic of China (PRC), China has the largest population of any country in the world. While China is known for its achievements in technology and transformation into a socio-economic world power, it is also the birthplace of some of the great world religions and schools of thought, primarily Confucianism and Daoism. In addition to these two homegrown traditions, Buddhism was introduced to China thousands of years ago. Over time, the three main schools of thought became the framework for Chinese society as these religious traditions became deeply ingrained into Chinese culture. Each tradition grew on its own over thousands of years yet simultaneously intertwined with the others, causing the religion we see today to be "the product of continuous historical development from prehistoric times" (Adler, Chinese Religions). Chinese religions have been a crucial part of Chinese society for thousands of years, and their far-reaching impact is present in today's culture and Chinese psyche.

As will be discussed in greater depth in upcoming sections, China has faced multiple anti-religious periods that attempted to eradicate religion from society, leaving the concept of religion tainted with a negative stigma. Religious destruction during the twentieth century and the current Chinese government's publicly atheist stance may lead some to believe that religion no longer exists in China. However, despite these factors, religion in China has rapidly re-

emerged as more and more Chinese identify publicly as religious. In the words of Fenggang Yang, China's religious revival in the last few decades has been "one of the greatest awakenings in human history" (Yang 565). Chinese religion has proved to be persistent, both institutionally and as a critical part of Chinese culture. China, with thousands of years of religious background and a history of anti-religious movements and atheist political ideology, is a unique case for analyzing religion. Although some scholars, such as Yang, have argued that China experienced and is continuing to experience a religious revival, there is still a perception that China is an irreligious country.

CHINA AS AN "ATHEIST" COUNTRY

Assessing China's political and historical background is crucial to understanding why many individuals have concluded that Chinese people are not religious. In order to break down this misinformation, we must first understand how the academic community arrived at the conclusion that China is a country full of atheists. China is frequently described as an "irreligious" or "atheist" country full of non-believers. While the government does have an official atheist stance and many Chinese people do not identify as religious followers, there is a greater sense of religion embedded into the culture than is visible on the surface. Many articles and journals emphasize this point by providing statistics about how few Chinese people say they are religious. For example, an article for the World Economic Forum entitled "Losing their religion? These are the world's most atheistic countries," the author cites a WIN/Gallup Poll, which states that only 9% of Chinese people are religious. She goes on to say that about two-thirds of Chinese people claim to be atheist, making China the most atheist country in the world. Readers are left with the impression that next to no one in China has any sense of religiosity or

spirituality. In addition to this article, the map below shows a visual representation of the *same* WIN/Gallup Poll, this time published by *The Independent*. Interestingly, the first article interprets the poll as saying 67% of Chinese people are atheist, while *The Independent* article puts the range between 40-49.9%. This image makes it quite clear that a blanket label of "atheist" has been applied to China. Both are reputable news sources, demonstrating that both news sources and polling organizations have written China off as a country full of atheists.

These examples are only a few of many journals, articles, and a variety of other sources that claim China is an atheist country with little to no religion. However, as we will see, believing that China has no religion, or no history of religion is a grave misinterpretation of the current situation. In fact, it has been a misinterpretation since Chinese scholars first began evaluating Chinese religion and culture due to comparing the Chinese context to the Western context.

WHY IS IT BELIEVED CHINA HAS NO RELIGION?

The word "religion" is a historically and politically charged word in the Chinese context. The misapplication of the word "religion" began in the early twentieth century. One scholar who

aptly describes this series of events is Dr. David A. Palmer, professor at University of Hong Kong. He is one of the leading scholars in the field of the anthropology of religion with a specific focus on Chinese religion. Palmer explains the history of how the term "religion" was imported to China, and how it did not directly translate, which resulted in a commonly accepted scholarly perspective that China was not religious and had never been religious. When China and the Western world began interacting in the nineteenth century, many Chinese intellectuals began comparing the existence of religion in both regions. These scholars, with their understanding of what Western religion looked like--structured and organized--concluded that China was not religious because it lacked organized religion. Palmer references a very important Chinese scholar Liang Qichao 梁啓超(1873-1929), a leading intellectual of the time, who is known for being a Qing Dynasty historian, scholar, and politician. He was the scholar who imported the Chinese word *zongjiao* (shūkyō) 宗教 from the modern Japanese, where the term had been used to express the Western concept of religion (Palmer 18). He was heavily influenced by the Western and more specifically Christian understanding of religion, so when applying the idea of *zongjiao* to his own culture, he did not see the organized structure of Western religion, and thus concluded that "theological ideas, conceptions of an afterlife, or religious organizations in China" did not exist. Liang was one of the most influential scholars of his time, and his writings and thoughts on religion and Chinese culture directly impacted future social movements in China. In combination with other intellectuals, his ideology inspired the May Fourth Movement that sought to remove traditional Chinese culture from society, including traditional Chinese religion.

THE NEW CULTURE MOVEMENT

The problem of defining and understanding the concept of religion in China is key to understanding the religious environment in Chinese society today. In addition to the problematic outcome of using a Western definition of religion to analyze the religious situation in China in the early nineteenth and twentieth centuries, anti-tradition and anti-religious movements also painted religion in a negative light. The complicated relationship between Chinese culture, politics, and religion started primarily at the beginning of the twentieth century, which affected the attitudes of later political leaders and academics. For example, as was previously mentioned, thinkers like Liang Qichao published writings that inspired more young scholars to critically question Chinese society and tradition. The impact of these anti-religious sentiments on the youth is incredibly important because, as Fenggang Yang points out, youth have always been "the forefront of the great spiritual awakening that seems to be sweeping the vast land of China" (Yang, Youth and Religion, 147). The younger generations have always played a role in the rise and fall of religion, which makes them an important group to study. Thus, during the early twentieth century, religion was being questioned both in the way the word *zongjiao* affected academics and in the way traditional religion became politically charged.

For centuries, China had been governed by Confucian laws until the final dynasty was defeated and the Republic of China was established in 1911. By 1915, some people were calling for a return to a Confucian-led dynastic system where Confucianism was the official state religion. However, in a popular magazine *New Youth,* young people attacked Confucianism, "blaming it for withholding China from progress, democracy, and scientific development, and calling it the religion of rites and proprieties (*li jiao*) as the religion of cannibalism" (Yang, Youth and Religion, 148). They were certainly affected by anti-tradition and anti-religious

thinkers like Li Qichao. Young people began to believe that Confucianism was the force that caused China's problems, and for China to progress, Confucianism needed to be destroyed, including physical representations of it such as temples and Confucian schools. These young people began to band together, and eventually formed a large movement referred to as The New Culture Movement. While the movement first began with the purpose of removing Confucian roots from Chinese culture, their dislike for religion did not stop there. The New Culture Movement also targeted Christianity as it was believed to be the religion of Western colonizers. The New Culture movement, which was run by youth and intellectuals, eventually impacted the general public's attitude toward religion. Since then, "it has become a norm for the modern intellectuals to be anti-religious. They have campaigned to clean up the society of superstitions, including all kinds of religious beliefs and practices" (Yang, Youth and Religion, 150). The leaders of this movement spread anti-religious sentiments not only through academia, but throughout society. The impact of the New Culture Movement is critical to understanding future anti-religious movements that shaped the course of Chinese history; more specifically, the New Culture Movement laid the groundwork for China's most famous leader, Mao Zedong, and his party's similar goal of eradicating religion from Chinese society.

CULTURAL REVOLUTION

An exclusively atheist government and irreligious society became widespread under Mao Zedong's leadership, and particularly during the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976. Discussing the Cultural Revolution in its entirety is out of the scope of this paper, but its effect on society is critical to contextualizing the current state of religion in China. This movement effectively wiped out religion during the 10 years and resulted in a stigma against religion that

had long-lasting impacts, even to today. The Cultural Revolution was a societal movement intended to revitalize the Chinese spirit with a focus on re-energizing the youth for a new, stronger future. However, the idea of what belonged in the future and what should be eliminated from the past drove the policies of the Cultural Revolution. More specifically, Chairman Mao believed in destroying the "Four Olds," otherwise known as "old ideas, old values, old customs, and old traditions" (Zuo 100). The goal of this movement was to remove traditional elements from Chinese society to make way for the implementation of Mao's communist ideology. His demands resulted in the persecution of religious practitioners, the destruction of temples and sites of worship, and essentially wiped religion off the surface of society, so that "it was as if the religion of China had never existed" (Zuo 101).

In addition to removal of the Four Olds, inspiration from Marxist doctrines also drove the persecution of religion during the Cultural Revolution. Karl Marx believed "human beings, having created God (or gods), elevate the divinity above themselves thereby falling prey to religious alienation and false consciousness." For him, religion was "the reflection of human misery and a sickness of society. It was also the opiate of the people, a means used to justify the status quo and legitimate the current social order" (Zuo 100). As the new Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took power, Chairman Mao implemented policies that aligned with Marx's anti-religious sentiments. Religion was believed to be superstitious, and instead the people should believe in and follow Marxist doctrines. When reflecting on growing up during the Cultural Revolution, Fenggang Yang remembers being taught in school that "God is dead" and "religion is gone" (Yang 567). Anti-religious rhetoric permeated every facet of the government and society as the Chinese Community Party attempted to completely eradicate religion.

Those who risked maintaining their religious beliefs and practices were "forced to practice in secret," which led to the establishment of underground religious movements and groups. This mass movement to private and secretive worship led to the creation of underground religious movements. According to the Chinese Communist Party at the time, there were "effectively no *recognized* believers of any religion in China," but many remained true to their beliefs covertly (Lamb). Thus, while there appeared to be no religion in China during these 10 years, religion persevered in secret. However, while not the same as traditional religion, during this time many Chinese people turned to their leader to fill the void left by religion and acted very publicly in support of Chairman Mao.

CULT OF MAO

While religion was banned and "no longer existed," many scholars have discovered that Chinese people filled this gap through what is referred to as the Cult of Mao. For example, Yang states, "Ironically, while all conventional religions were eradicated from society, the personality cult of Chairman Mao climaxed during the Cultural Revolution" (Yang, Youth and Religion, 152). Mao essentially became a god-like figure that was worshipped by the Chinese people. Yang describes this new form of religion as a "pseudo-religion." He recounts his own experience growing up in China at this time and describes the impact Chairman Mao had on the youth:

> "The personality cult of Mao Zedong was prevalent. The Red Guards of Chairman Mao—the college or high school students who were loyal to Chairman Mao—would hold up the Little Red Book of Mao's quotes and form the so-called hong haiyang (red sea) while chanting "long live Chairman Mao!" and performing the loyalty dance toward a Mao's portrait or statue" (Yang, What about China?, 568)

During his time in power, the "Cult of Mao" acted as a quasi-religion in which Mao was presumed to be an eternal figure. Although traditional religions were removed from society, this new version of "religion" emerged, which demonstrates that people desired religion in some form, and found it by following both Mao as a figure and adhering to his teachings and ideology. Clearly, even if it was a new form of religion, the need to fill a religious void was persistent even during Mao's time in power. However, on September 9, 1976, the Chinese people faced the devastating loss of their leader and had to come to terms with the fact that their god-like leader was actually mortal. Many people had become so convinced that Chairman Mao was a god that they were shocked when his death finally came. Yang remembers hearing people crying in the streets wondering how, "'the great leader, the great general, the great helmsman, and the reddest sun in people's hearts, Chairman Mao,' died? Should not he live for 10,000 years or forever?" (Yang, What about China? 568). While this quasi-form of religion filled the religious hole in Chinese society for around a decade, upon his death that void opened up once again. Chinese people could no longer put their faith and hope into the Great Leader; consequently, a new opportunity for religious re-growth in China emerged. This new period of history resulted in a new chapter of flourishing religion both due to the desire to fill the void left by the disenchanted followers of Mao, but also because new leadership implemented policies that promoted greater religious freedom.

CCP OFFICIAL POLICIES ON RELIGION

After Chairman Mao's death in 1976, the 1980s welcomed a new chapter of China's relationship with religion. The effect of many influential scholars claiming China did not have a religion in combination with two major anti-religious movements, it is understandable why it

appears on the surface as though China is irreligious. However, when China's new leader Deng Xiaoping came to power, the religious situation shifted significantly. The 1980s were a time of major policy change and religious freedom that had not been enjoyed for over a decade. When Deng Xiaoping came to power, not only were people left disillusioned by the Cult of Mao, but he believed in "open door" policies, which were economically based, but also impacted religious freedoms. In 1982, China adopted a new constitution, including Article 36, which "maintains freedom of religious belief" and also states protection of "normal religious activities" (Lamb). That same year, the Chinese Communist Party went one step further by issuing a document called "The Basic Viewpoint and Policy on Religious Question during Our Country's Socialist Period," which is frequently referred to as Document 19. This document has been seen as an "astoundingly candid analysis of China's religious crisis and the legal basis for China's religious revival" (Johnson 27). It essentially admitted to the wrongdoings of the Mao regime and articulated the ways in which religion was attacked during the Cultural Revolution, documenting that the Chinese Communist Party "used violent measures against religion that forced religions movements underground," and "fabricated a host of wrongdoings and injustices that they pinned upon these religious personages" (Johnson 27). Document 19 was a groundbreaking text that for the first time admitted to the Chinese people that violence had been used to take away the right to religious freedom.

In addition to admitting failures of the Mao regime, the document officially granted the right to religious freedom and even detailed specific practices that had once been banned that were now permitted, stating that it was "permissible, either in places of worship or at home, for Buddha worship, scripture chanting, incense burning, prayer, Bible study, preaching, Mass, baptism, initiation as a monk or nun, fasting, celebration of religious festivals." (Johnson 27).

Document 19 called for a return to the government's relationship with religion that had been in place before Chairman Mao came to power and reinstated the five major religions approved by the government, including Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism. While religious freedom has been officially granted since 1979, "the CCP in its official discourse has never given up its ultimate goal of eventual elimination of religion at the ultimate stage of society – communism" (Yang 25). Thus, Chinese people enjoy religious freedoms so long as their beliefs and practices align with the five approved religions; nevertheless, the government still believes that eventually religion will be removed from society.

Overall, the CCP expressed their "regret for the past treatment of religious persons and organizations" and acknowledged "the complexity and longevity associated with religion and the crucial role religion plays in individual and societal development" (Lamb). Legally and politically, this document was the foundation of the religious revival in China. However, the tumultuous history of religion in China during the mid-twentieth century impacted how comfortable Chinese people feel about expressing their religious beliefs. In fact, most people "shun the word 'religion,' which is seen as a sensitive term, something extremely formal, hierarchical, and political. This results in colossal misunderstandings when outsiders try to use these terms to gauge religious or spiritual life in China" (Johnson 28). While religious freedom for followers of the government-approved five religions was reinstated, the social stigma associated with religion was still present as Chinese people recovered from an entire decade of religious persecution.

After 10 years of adamant rejection of religion in all capacities during the Cultural Revolution, it is quite remarkable that the Chinese government publicly declared religious tolerance and apologized for its treatment of religious practitioners in the past. While religious

freedom and tolerance in China is far from perfect, a conversation that exceeds the scope of this project, the religious freedom expressed in the early 1980s has certainly impacted the number of religious practitioners in China today. Although Chinese religion has had a tumultuous past, China has entered a new era of religious tolerance and has reached an understanding that religion will inevitably be present in the lives of the people.

All of this is to say that there are many factors that have combined to make it understandable why on the surface it appears that China truly is irreligious. The foreign origins of the term *zongjiao* does not identify with the traditional understanding of Chinese, causing Chinese and Western intellectuals to believe that China has no religion. Additionally, the anti-religious sentiments of the New Culture Movement made way for an even more aggressive attack on religion during the Cultural Revolution. Given the decade of "removal" of religion from China combined with the Chinese Communist Party's official atheist stance, one may be inclined to believe that religion in China is rare or even nonexistent. So far, we have analyzed the academic, political, and historical reasons why China is believed to be irreligious. By laying this groundwork, we are then able to debunk the myth of Chinese irreligiosity.

DEBUNKING THE MYTH OF CHINESE IRRELIGIOSITY

In this section we will assess surveys and statistics that have attempted to understand the true religious situation in modern China. Surveys that accurately collect and report information have debunked the myth that China is not a religious country. We will also discuss why accurate data collection has been so challenging in the past; additionally, this section will consider how studies that approach the concept of religion in a way that is more relatable to Chinese people are much more successful. Accurate statistics have proven that many more Chinese people hold

religious beliefs than previously thought. It is critical to understand the extent to which Chinese religion still exists today to further analyze how these religious elements have become so deeply embedded in Chinese culture. The persistence of religion is necessary to understand the subconscious religiosity in Chinese culture, which has influenced the worldview of many Chinese youth.

RELIGIOUS RESURGENCE IN NUMBERS

China's tumultuous relationship with religion in the 1960s to late 1970s makes it not too surprising that one of the first country-wide collections of data about Chinese religiosity occurred in 1997. However, this new period of collecting data on Chinese religion has brought two major findings: one being yet again the issue of using the term "religion" to collect information from Chinese people and the other being an increased willingness to report religious belief at the beginning of the twenty-first century. These questions have been brought forth by a study done by Stark and Liu, which will be explained more deeply in this section. In 1997, the first major collection was published in a white paper written by the Chinese government that claimed that there were "approximately 100 million religious believers and practitioners in China and outlines the various legal and judicial institutions set in place to maintain religious freedom" (Lamb). This white paper continued to acknowledge the faults of the Cultural Revolution, going so far as to say, it "had a disastrous effect on all aspects of the society in China, including religion" (White Paper). The document also demonstrates that religion was still present in China only two decades after the end of the Cultural Revolution. However, this first set of data began a conversation about the challenging and often problematic way information about religion in China is collected.

Surveys that have sought to collect data about the number of religious believers in China provide evidence for the growth of religiousness in China in recent years. A project by Rodney Stark and Eric Y. Liu compares data from 2001 to 2007 and demonstrates the rapid change in Chinese attitudes about religion during the twenty-first century. Stark and Liu wanted to focus on native Chinese religions because while most Western academics are focused on the growth of Christianity in China, "millions more [Chinese people] have returned to Buddhism, and once again huge numbers of Chinese are pursuing their traditional folk religions and worshipping at ancestral shrines" (Stark and Liu 282). Thus, while their comparisons include foreign religions like Islam and Christianity, their primary focus is the revitalization of native Chinese religious traditions. Their data came from a 2001 national survey by the Research Center for Contemporary China at Peking University while the 2007 survey was conducted in 2007 by Horizon, Ltd., which is China's "largest and most respected polling firm" (Stark and Liu 283).

Table 1: Religious Affiliation in China

	2001	2007
None	93.0	77.1
Buddhist	2.1	18.1
Daoist	n/a	0.6
Confucianist	n/a	0.2
Christian	3.3	2.7
Muslim	0.4	0.2
Other	0.2	0.2
Don't know	0.4	0.9
No Answer	0.6	0.0
	100.0	100.0

Stark and Liu noticed the drop in respondents who said they had no religious belief from 93.0% in 2001 to 77.1% in 2007 and believed such a significant change could be explained not through a massive number of converts, but, rather a reflection of "an increased willingness of

Chinese to admit to having a religion" (Stark and Liu 284) Additionally, they believed that " it seems unlikely that very many of the 77% who said they had no religion were actually irreligious," but instead may have been influenced by the term "religion," a discussion that will take place more deeply in later sections. Furthermore, the number of Buddhists skyrocketed from 2.1% to 18.1% in a mere six years, which once again "cannot be a huge wave of conversations but a dramatic change in the willingness of Buddhists to come into the open," which demonstrates a noteworthy change in social and political attitudes towards religion in China. Overall, they noticed that respondents who reported being involved in some type of religious practice increased dramatically from 7.0% in 2001 to 23.9% in 2007. Such significant changes demonstrate that there are not necessarily more converts to religion--although this may be the case with Christianity--but instead that the social and political climate have made more Chinese people comfortable with publicly stating their beliefs in Buddhism or even folk religions. This data demonstrates the significant change not only in the number of publicly religious people in China, but also the transforming attitude towards religion in the twenty-first century. The desire to focus on Chinese youth and specifically to focus on Chinese university students stems from this phenomenon that in recent years, more Chinese people are comfortable sharing their religious beliefs. Given the drastic change from 2001 to 2007, one would anticipate that the trend of openly communicating about religious beliefs would continue, and even more individuals would speak candidly about their beliefs. The Chinese youth of today grew up in this more accepting and open religious environment, and so I believe they are a critical group to study to understand the current perceptions of religion in China. However, before we get into the discussion of religion in China today, one must first understand China's complicated religious

history during the mid-twentieth century and how it affected social and political attitudes toward Chinese religions.

APPLYING THE WESTERN CONCEPT OF RELIGION TO CHINESE CONTEXT

When it comes to the most accurate way of collecting data about religious practices in China, language has been identified as a major influencer of results. What some scholars have discovered is that using the term "religion" while collecting information about Chinese religious believers results in very low reported numbers. We have discussed the impact of this word on early Chinese scholars' interpretation of the religious situation in China as well as the negative association of religion during the New Culture Movement and The Cultural Revolution; however, it is also pertinent to the discussion of data collection and the modern Chinese person's understanding of the meaning of religion. Given these historical and political reasons, it is understandable why today's generation of Chinese people may be uncomfortable expressing their religious beliefs because of the stigma associated with the word "religion." Chau describes this as a response to the reality that today religion "is seen as a sensitive term, something extremely formal, hierarchical, and political," which is a product of Chinese religion's tumultuous past (Johnson 28). For outside researchers, this "results in colossal misunderstandings when [using] these terms to gauge religious or spiritual life in China" (Johnson 28). Many of these surveys use flawed language because they attempt to get Chinese people to identify their behavior based on the Western concept of *zongjiao* (religion). Given the historical stigma around the word "religion" and the fact that the concept of religion is imported from the West, Johnson claims that if one asks a Chinese person if they believe in *zongjiao,* "almost all Chinese will say no" (Johnson 29). Johnson provides a series of evidence for the

claim that using belief in "religion" as a basis for evaluating the religiosity of Chinese people is horribly flawed:

> One government survey in 2012, for example, showed that only 10 percent of respondents said they had a "religious belief," with 89.6 percent saying they had none. International polling firms seem to reflect similarly low levels of belief. In 2014, for example, the Pew Research Center issued a major study on global views about religion. It came to the startling conclusion that only 14 percent of respondents believed that morality was linked to belief in religion. This led some Western commentators to write of "the atheists of Beijing." In 2015, a WIN/Gallup International Poll went further, reporting that 61 percent of Chinese identified themselves as atheists—versus the worldwide average of just 11 percent atheists (Johnson 28-9).

Clearly, use of the term "religion" results in very low numbers of reported religious practitioners. However, when asked about specific beliefs, the results completely transform. For example, "In a 2007 study of over three thousand people...44 percent agreed with the statement, "life and death depends on the will of heaven," while 25 percent said they had experienced the intervention of a "Buddha" (*fo*) in their lives in the past 12 months. (Johnson 29). Belief in the will of heaven and the Buddha is a clear indication of religious belief, but those beliefs were not accurately represented in the surveys that merely used the term "religion." Thus, it is apparent that to uncover accurate information about Chinese people's religious beliefs, one must go beyond the title of religion, and dig deeper into specific beliefs and practices.

PREVIOUS DATA COLLECTION

Another concern regarding collecting accurate information on the number of religious practitioners in China is how to label or categorize each religion and their associated practices. Some foreign research institutions have attempted to conduct widespread surveys, most notably the Pew-Templeton Foundations' "Global Religious Figures" project. The data collected was as follows:

> China's total population is 1,341,340,000, among whom 18.2% are Buddhists (i.e. 244.12 million); 5.1% are Christians (i.e. 68.41 million); 21.9% practice folk religions (presumably including Daoism since there is no separate category for Daoism) (i.e. 293.75 million); 1.8% are Muslims (i.e. 24.14 million); 52.2% are unaffiliated (though it is not clear if this means "not religious") (i.e. 700.18 million); and finally, less than 1% are Hindus, Jews, and followers of other religions (fewer than 11 million).

While these provide some clues to the number of religious practitioners in China, depending on one's definition of religion, these categories are somewhat problematic. First, if one considers Confucianism as a religion, there is no category for people to articulate what Confucian practices they participate in. Second, there is no distinction between Daoism and folk religion. The other well-known source of statistics about Chinese religion comes from the Chinese government itself. However, it, too, does not paint a full picture of the current religious situation in China. The data comes from "China's Politics and Practices on Protecting Freedom of Religious Belief," a white paper released in April 2018 by the Information Office of the State Council. While it does not give any numbers for Buddhists, Daoists, or those who participate in practices associated with folk religion, if one "subtract[s] the number of Muslims and Christians from the total number (200 million), we can surmise that the total number of Buddhists, Daoists, and "folk

religionists" combined would be around 136 million" (Chau 10). Thus, given that China's population at the time of the survey was approximately 1,400,000,000, "the White Paper estimates that the total number of believers to be at 14.29% of the total population, quite low when compared to the Pew-Templeton figure of 47%" (Chau 10). Clearly, there are significant discrepancies in the number of religious believers in the major surveys that have been conducted in China. This dissonance begs the question: how is religion defined in China? How do Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, and folk religion play into the definition of religion? How does the language used in surveys affect their outcome? And finally, is there a difference between those who say they have or do not have religious beliefs and the practices those individuals participate in?

HISTORY OF DEFINING RELIGION

As we have previously discussed, in the academic world the definition of religion has been contested by scholars for decades, ranging from a Western context to the Chinese context. However, defining religion in China becomes particularly complicated because of its political nature. There are major discrepancies between scholarly definitions of religion and the Chinese Communist Party's official stance on religion. Officially, since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) on the mainland in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has made distinctions between religion (zongjiao 宗教) and superstitions (mixin 迷信) (Yang 24-5). The CCP sees religion as more institutionalized beliefs and practices, where superstitions are not as centrally organized. This gives the government flexibility to ban religious or "superstitious" activities associated with cults because "cults" are not official religions. While the government has its own interpretation of religion that grants it a certain amount of control over groups that do

not fall under its definition, for the purposes of this paper we will be looking at religion through an academic lens as opposed to the Chinese government definition.

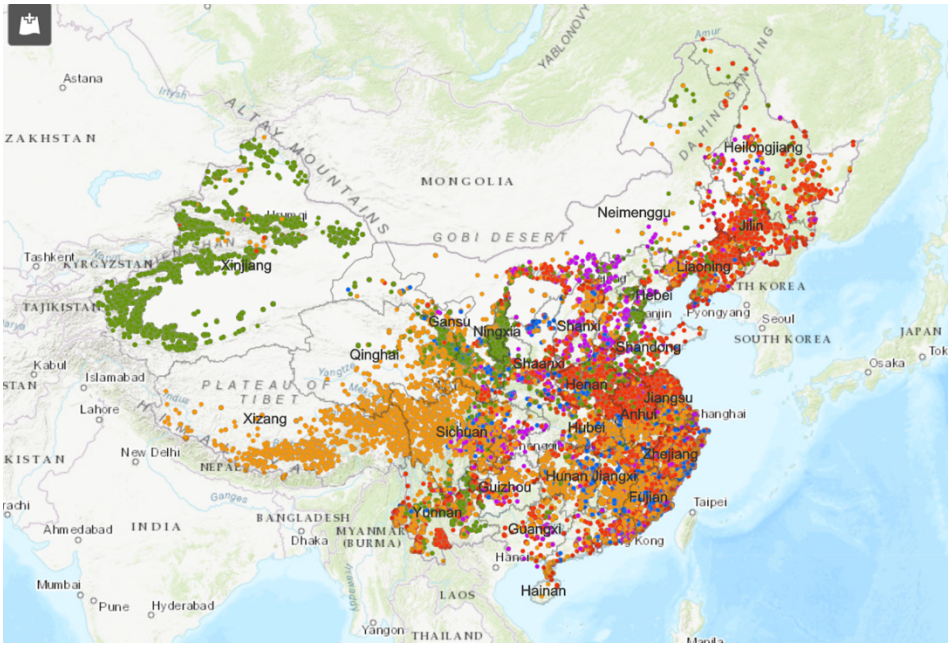
CHINESE TRADITIONAL RELIGIONS

We have seen the importance of language in collecting accurate statistics about the number of religious believers in China. This showed that there are more religious believers in China than previously thought. To understand the full effect of religion on Chinese culture and the Chinese psyche, we must first address the belief systems of traditional Chinese religions. Certain elements of Chinese religions have become a major part of Chinese society, which in turn has caused many Chinese people to subconsciously hold religious beliefs. Furthermore, to understand why many Chinese people do not report that they adhere to one tradition, we must analyze the interconnected nature of Chinese religions. By doing so, it will highlight one important explanation as to why Chinese people frequently do not claim to be a member of one specific religion.

RELIGION IN CHINA IN GENERAL

China's religious landscape is unique because it is composed of native and non-native religions. Daoism and Confucianism are considered native Chinese traditions, while Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam are all imported from other regions. All religious traditions have hundreds or even thousands of years of history in China, as Daoism emerged roughly in the fourth century C.E., Buddhism was imported as early as the second century CE., Islam was brought to China around the seventh century C.E., and while "Catholicism and Protestantism represent distinct affiliations in modern China," they can both be traced back to Christian

missionaries that arrived to China in the seventh century C.E. (Wang et al 1). To visualize the religious diversity of China, Fenggang Yang and his team created a map of all recorded religious sites in China. Green dots represent mosques, orange dots represent Buddhist temples, red dots represent Protestant churches, blue dots represent Daoist temples, and purple dots represent Catholic churches. Clearly, religious activity in China is on the rise, which is especially interesting in comparison to religious changes in the United States. According to a survey from the PEW Research Center, the religious population in the United States has been declining over recent decades, while simultaneously "China is trending in the opposite direction; although the majority of the Chinese population identifies as non-religious, there are increasing numbers of people converting to various world religions" (Wang et al 1).



This changing religious climate in China in recent decades has attracted the attention of scholars from around the world. However, as articulated by Stark and Liu, while "the West has been focused on the rapid growth of Christianity in China, millions more have returned to Buddhism, and once again huge numbers of Chinese are pursuing their traditional folk religions

and worshipping at ancestral shrines" (Stark and Liu 282). Much scholarly work focuses specifically on the growth of Christianity in China, but oftentimes revitalization of traditions associated with Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, and even folk religion are underrepresented in the literature. Western scholars may be more interested in Christianity because it is more familiar, and it is becoming increasingly popular because the number of converts is easier to track. The popularity of Christianity, in that way, is much more tangible than perhaps Buddhism or Daoism because those traditions are not built on the need for public commitment or devotion. It is much easier to document the number of Christians, but it is a much more difficult task to identify who, for example, is a Buddhist because it does not have the same organized structure as a Western religion. It is for these reasons that this project intended to focus on not only contributing to an underrepresented area of the literature, but also to unearth the religiosity within Chinese people.

THREE TRADITIONS

Chinese religion is unlike many Western religions because different traditions often coexist and have interconnected beliefs. The three main recognized religions are Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, also known as the Three Teachings. These three traditions "have the markings of organized religion: founders (real or legendary), professional leaders, institutional forms, written scriptures, liturgical traditions, etc." (Jochim 5-6). A survey conducted by Fenggang Yang found that "80 to 90 percent of Buddhists and Daoists believe or practice folk religion, and 40 to 60 percent of Christians and Muslims also believe or practice folk religion" (Yang 29). These findings demonstrate that beliefs from multiple traditions can be held by one individual, which means that Chinese religions are more interconnected than they appear to be in

the Western world. In other words, “It is not uncommon to find Buddhist and Confucian figures in a Daoist temple. Nor is it extraordinary to see a self-professed Buddhist offer incense at a Daoist temple to a historical figure known for his Confucian virtues” (Foy). The interconnected nature of Chinese traditions is important because it will later help explain why many Chinese people are hesitant to identify themselves as a follower of one specific tradition, when in fact they hold beliefs stemming from two or more of these traditions. These three traditions are the root of a majority of Chinese societal values, and they have contributed to Chinese culture in their own ways. While they are separate traditions, they are deeply interconnected, and after thousands of years they have persisted. Their continued existence is not limited to self-identified practitioners, but their ideologies and practices are the bedrock of Chinese culture. Their continued existence shows us not only that religion has persisted not only externally, but religious values have continued to be held by many Chinese people subconsciously because they were raised in a culture with embedded religiosity.

BUDDHISM IN CHINA

In order to understand how Chinese traditions could have become interconnected over time, it is important to know their basic doctrines, beliefs, and history. When Buddhism was imported from India it took on a new identity as it became embedded into the Chinese religious framework and became one of the fundamental schools of thought in China. Over hundreds of years of development, Chinese Buddhism even developed its own branches native to China, including Huayan, Tiantai, Jingtu, and Chan Buddhism (Jones). While Buddhism was originally a foreign religion, through its development in China, Buddhists began to “explain the Buddhist doctrine in terms of traditional Chinese thought,” so the conflict between Buddhism and Chinese

values was alleviated (Zürcher 79). The most significant dissonance between Buddhism and Chinese traditional thought was found in the contrasting values of Buddhism and the values of Confucianism, especially when it came to Buddhist monasteries. Monastic life "implied the abandonment of family life," which in particular clashed with the Confucian principle of filial piety, which taught individuals to take care of their parents and placed high value on family (Zürcher 78-9). However, Buddhism eventually developed into its own Chinese attributes, and became Chinese Buddhism.

While China never became a "Buddhist country" like other Asian countries such as Korea and Japan, Buddhism still successfully spread throughout the country and became embedded in Chinese culture. For example, "the Buddhist concept of salvation could be integrated into ancestor worship; the belief in karma and rebirth became part of Chinese popular lore" (Zürcher 79). Buddhism eventually had a deeply influential effect on Chinese culture and the worldview of many Chinese individuals; consequently, central concepts of Buddhism became a backbone of Chinese culture, to the point that, as we will discuss later, many people subconsciously hold beliefs that originated from Buddhism. While Buddhism affected the worldview of many Chinese people, the ability for Buddhism to combine with traditional Chinese beliefs explains its popularity in the country today. In fact, China has the world's largest Buddhist population, with an estimated 185-250 million practitioners, according to Freedom House, making it China's largest institutionalized religion (Albert). While the effect of Buddhism is clear based on the number of practitioners, its effect is more deeply rooted into Chinese culture, and influences even those who are not technically Buddhist practitioners. However, the popularity of Buddhism and its deep influence on Chinese culture would not have been possible without the help of Daoism because in order "to help the Chinese comprehend

Buddhist concepts, Buddhists borrowed ideas from Daoism via the Chinese language" (Foy). Although they are two different traditions, their history of interconnectedness and symbiosis highlights the interwoven nature of Chinese traditions. It is important to understand how the three major institutions work together because that allows us to comprehend why it is less typical to find individuals who identify as a follower or practitioner of a single tradition.

DAOISM IN CHINA

Daoism is one of the earliest belief systems in China with thousands of years of history. It centers around the concept of 道 (dao or tao), which roughly translates to "the way" or "the path" (Peng 250). The Dao is essentially an explanation for all of the functions and changes in the observable natural world. The great Chinese philosopher Laozi is credited for writing about the Dao in *Tao Te Ching*, which translates to Classic of the Way and Virtue and is the text from which Daoism was born. Laozi is traced back to the 6th century B.C.E., but many scholars today question if he truly was a historical figure or is more of a mythological character (Chan). Laozi believed that the essence of the Dao could be given a name, but in reality, the Dao is an intangible element that cannot be fully expressed in words. Laozi used a metaphor of water to help one comprehend the Dao: "Water flows naturally, without interference, and does not attract attention. In its weak, unnoticed actions, water (in the same way as the Tao) is able to overcome the strong" (Peng 250). In other words, the "Dao cannot be defined or described; it is 'nameless'" (Chan). However, for the purposes of attempting to understand it, Laozi gave the Dao a name, even though he himself admitted to not knowing its real name.

There are two words in Chinese used to describe Daoism as a philosophical tradition and organized religion, *daojia* and *daojiao*, respectively (Chan). While Daoism began as a

philosophical tradition started by Laozi, beginning in the Han dynasty from 206BC - 220 A.D., Daoism became more institutionalized as it became "distinguished by its own forms of organisation, priests, rituals, beliefs, and scripture texts" (Overmyer 5). Daoist gods were different from other gods because they were immortal beings and not deified humans. In order to connect to these gods, "Daoist priests, trained by masters or in monasteries, developed elaborate technologies and rituals devoted to [them]," so over time "Daoism became a complete religious system in its own right" (Overmyer 5). Over hundreds of years of development, different schools of Daoism were developed, and eventually many basic principles of Daoism became ingrained in the Chinese psyche, including the importance of man's relationship with nature and prioritizing one's physical health. The influence of Daoism on Chinese culture and the Chinese worldview will be discussed in more depth;

CONFUCIANISM AS A RELIGION

For decades, scholars have debated not only the definition of religion, but specifically the definition of religion in China. Given the vast range of religious systems and their interconnected nature, it can be incredibly difficult to arrive at a definition of Chinese religion that encompasses everything from ancestor worship to belief in karma. Defining religion in the Chinese context has been problematic for Western scholars because there has been a tendency to apply the Western concept of religion onto the Chinese context. As we have previously discussed, the concept of "religion" in the West is noticeably different from China; in fact, there was not a word for "religion" in Chinese until the term *zongjiao* "was formed, or rather adopted from Japanese, to translate the western concept of 'religion' as a structured system of beliefs and practices, separate from society, which organizes believers in a church-like organization" (Goossaert 14).

The problematic nature of applying "religion" to traditions such as Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, or folk religion is that, as Adam Chau argues, "readers and scholars often fall into a 'Protestant triumphalist prejudice' that grants more dignity and legitimacy to religious traditions that are believed to be 'higher' on an imagined evolutionary trajectory of religions, denigrating those that are supposedly less institutionalized, less systemic, more "ritualistic," therefore "primitive" and "lower" (Chau 5). Some definitions of religion can exclude the less institutionalized aspects of Chinese religion, which devalues their existence simply because they do not fit in the mold of the Western idea of religion. Traditional Chinese religions are far less institutionalized than Western religions, where practitioners do not necessarily conform to the system of say a Christian church or Muslim mosque. Instead, many individuals who participate in religious practices do so often within their family and may never participate in any "structured" religion as opposed to their Western counterparts. Thus, the task of defining religion in China is difficult. That being said, the most contested tradition is Confucianism as scholars have debated its religious or philosophical categorization for decades, so it requires a deeper analysis than the other two traditions.

INTRO TO CONFUCIAN BELIEFS

Like Buddhism and Daoism, Confucianism has deeply affected Chinese culture from hundreds of years ago to today. Compared to Buddhism and Daoism, Confucianism had a greater impact on societal structure; nevertheless, it has also embedded its own values into Chinese society, including the veneration of older family members and the importance of education. In terms of defining religion, however, Confucianism adds a complicated layer to the definition of religion in China. One of China's most impactful thought systems is Confucianism, which has

been critical to China's social development, from family structures to organization of the government. Throughout Chinese history, Confucianism has played a central role in how the government operates, which has caused interest of "the cultured elite" to continuously gravitate away from Buddhism and back towards Confucianism (Zürcher 79). Since the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.E.-220 C.E.) Confucianism was the dominant official religion (Zuo 100). Confucius (孔子) is arguably China's most famous philosopher whose ideas have been ingrained in Chinese culture and society since the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.E.-220 C.E.) when Confucianism was the dominant official religion (Zuo 100). Confucius was a government official who saw the corruption of the ruling elite and believed that China's corruption could be solved through the "knowledge of antiquity" and learning from the great leaders and thinkers of the past (Jaspers 53). His values and experiences caused him to "develop a new moral code based on respect, honesty, education, kindness and strong family bonds" ("Chinese Culture"). He believed that "government is the center of men's lives and all other considerations derive from it," so a moral and just government was crucial to a harmonious society (Jaspers 57). A moral government Confucius imagined began by teaching morality in the family. His ideology is divided into five values: *li* for ritual etiquette, *ren* for kindness to fellow humanity, *xin* for truthfulness and sincerity, *yi* for righteousness, and *xiao* for filial piety and strong family values ("Chinese Culture"). These values, particularly the emphasis on strong family values are still present in Chinese society today, demonstrating Confucianism's lasting impact on Chinese culture.

In China, Confucianism was applied to a wide variety of aspects of life. For example, family structures were based on Confucian doctrines, government officials were selected based on their knowledge of Confucian classical texts, and social stability was established through the Confucian value of respect for authority. Scholars have long debated whether Confucianism is a

philosophy or a religion. However, when Stark and Liu reference scholar Anna Xiao Dong Sun's 2005 visit to China, it becomes clear there is a religious element to Confucianism. On her visits to temples she "observed many visitors earnestly praying to statues of Confucius for a variety of blessings and benefits" (Stark and Liu 284). A great number of Chinese people do have a religion or do not believe that Confucianism is a religion, which is reflected by the previously mentioned 2007 Horizon Limited survey that found only 12 of 7,021 Chinese in the 2007 survey identified Confucianism as their religion (Stark and Liu 284). However, there appears to be a discrepancy between the number of individuals who report belief in Confucianism versus those who engage in physical acts of prayer or worship. Once again, we see that the definition of what constitutes a religion skews the results of many surveys because an individual may not report that they believe Confucianism is a religion but may engage in activities directly associated with religious practices, specifically those related to Confucius and Confucianism. Furthermore, "the Chinese Party-State does not include Confucianism as one of its legally recognized religions" and many people "in the general population do not consider Confucianism a religion" although "many people do hold certain Confucian values and maintain certain Confucian proprieties" (Yang 29). The primary example of this is filial piety, which is a key component of Confucianism and is practiced by many Chinese people who do not identify as Confucian believers.

In the article on Chinese Religions in The Encyclopedia of Religion, Jones defines religion as "a means of ultimate transformation and/or ultimate orientation" (Jones). She breaks down this definition by explaining that "ultimate transformation" implies,

> "(1) a given human condition that is in some way flawed, unsatisfactory, or caught in a dilemma; (2) a goal that posits a resolution of that problem or dilemma; and (3) a process

> leading toward the achievement of the goal. This formula is well-suited to Chinese religions because the concept of transformation (*hua*) is in fact a highly significant element in Confucian, Daoist, and Chinese Buddhist thought and practice."

While their foundational beliefs are different, Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism all believe that humanity can be improved through self-cultivation. Although these traditions may not align with other definitions of religion, I believe that Jones' definition applies to religions that have uniquely Chinese characteristics. Furthermore, this definition allows us to consider Confucianism as a religion. Confucianism's idea of "ultimate transformation" is "carried out through intensive study and discussion, self-examination, and meditation, often in the social context of public and private schools and academies, where prayers and sacrificial offerings to former Confucian 'sages and worthies' accompanied study and discussion" (Jones). Thus, with this definition of religion in mind, Confucianism is considered more than just a philosophy, but a religious tradition. Defining religion in a way that many scholars have allows for more well-rounded analysis of Chinese religion, specifically in terms of Confucianism's effect on Chinese culture and society. Clearly, Confucianism has an impact on the value system and practices of many Chinese people, so by not including it in the discussion of Chinese religion, we would be ignoring many aspects of the human experience that are so critical to Chinese culture.

RELIGIOSITY OF CHINESE YOUTH

Now that we more deeply understand the beliefs and practices of traditional Chinese religions, we will turn our discussion to the main group of subjects in this study. As we have mentioned, Chinese youth are a critical piece of the more general discussion of religion in China. The study done by Fenggang Yang and the interviews conducted with DePauw University

students both included international students, so in this section we will dive into the history of Chinese international students in the United States in general, and at DePauw University more specifically. The background and experiences of Chinese students are important to understanding the religious environment in which they were raised and why they may have a certain worldview.

HISTORY OF CHINESE STUDENTS IN THE UNITED STATES

As Stark and Liu found, in the early 2000s, they observed that the number of religious believers jumped significantly in a very short amount of time. They concluded that this must have been because more people felt comfortable expressing their religious beliefs, demonstrating that the landscape of China had become more religiously tolerant. Youth have always been at the forefront of religious movements, whether they be pro or anti religion. The intent behind focusing this project on Chinese university students, including students at DePauw University is inspired by the phenomenon that in the past two decades more Chinese people have become comfortable sharing their religiosity. One can interpret the significant increase of religious reporters to be an indication that the religious climate in China was becoming more tolerant and accepting. The Chinese youth of today, including today's university students, grew up in this environment where more and more Chinese people felt comfortable claiming their religious identities. Thus, I believe they are a critical group to study and analyze because they are an indication of the current religious climate in China. Chinese university students have been in the United States and at DePauw University for a very long time, and today they provide an important insight into how religion is perceived in China today, and the beliefs held and practices done by Chinese people.

Chinese international students have been sent to the United States for over a hundred years. The Qing Imperial government that ruled from 1644 to 1911 sent the first group of 120 students to the United States from 1872 to 1875. The inspiration for this was almost entirely political, as the government believed that sending students abroad was "the natural way to face the Western challenge," and were on "a special mission that linked their studies to the cause of national salvation." (Yan and Berliner 174). Almost every member of this early group of Chinese students was financially supported by the Chinese government. However, after the Qing dynasty was overthrown in 1911, financially independent students from wealthy families increasingly studied abroad, in comparison as opposed to the government-backed students who came before them. The number of students did not change significantly from then until the late-twentieth century.

From 1949 until the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), China was isolated from the rest of the world and foreign study was highly restricted. (Yan and Berliner 175). After a period of isolation from the rest of the world, China's policies on international education mirrored the economic openness Deng Xiaoping projected. This new time of openness directly impacted students' ability to study and encouraged more students to go to the U.S. for higher education. In 1978, the U.S. and China agreed to exchange students and scholars, and the number of students coming to the US soared (Yan and Berliner 173). Before this agreement was made, there were only 1,000 students from China in 1979, but by 1984 there were 10,100 international students from China studying at American colleges. More recently, during the 2018/19 academic year, 369,548 international students came from China, which represents 33.7% of all international students studying at American universities. Today, students from China represent the largest international student group studying in the United States (Yan and Berliner 174).

Since China opened to the rest of the world in 1978, it has sent more than three million students abroad, and the United States is the most popular destination (Liu 128). Chinese students are a massive population of American college students, which make them an important group to study. Students from China can be found on college campuses all across the United States and represent a significant portion of international students at DePauw.

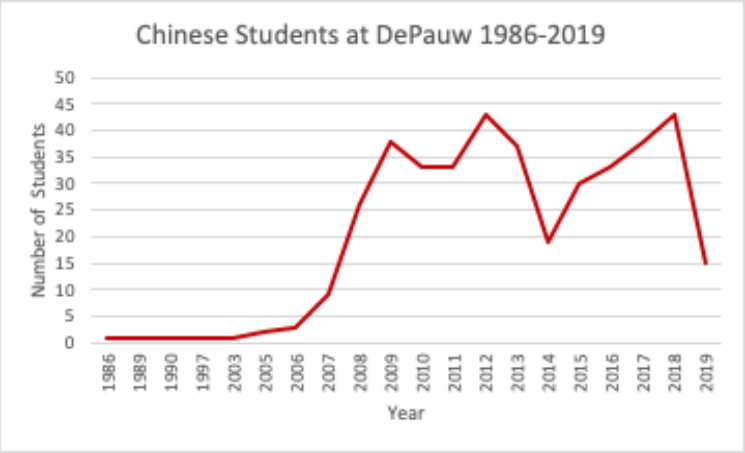
HISTORY OF CHINESE STUDENTS AT DEPAUW UNIVERSITY

The pattern of Chinese students studying in the United States also has impacted the number of students at DePauw University. The history of Chinese students at DePauw began at the turn of the twentieth century. According to Clifton J. Phillips, the first Chinese student at DePauw was Ming Chuan Liu who attended the university from 1896 to 1899. His passion for Christian ministry brought him to DePauw where he pursued a degree in Sacred Theology at DePauw's School of Theology. Upon graduation, he returned to China and was ordained into the Methodist ministry. After Liu's time at DePauw, the number of Chinese students remained very low. Over the next few decades, only one Chinese student graduated from DePauw University. Her name was Jean Chin-Ching Hseuh and she graduated in 1913 with a major in chemistry. She, too, returned to China after graduation and became the principal of an all girls' school (Phillips 1). The number of students from the late 1800s to the beginning of the 1920s is so few that there is detailed information documented about those individual students.

However, after the First World War a larger population of Chinese students appeared on campus. By fall of 1921, there were four men and one woman who organized a Chinese Students Club that held special celebrations on such holidays as the Chinese New Year (Phillips 1). An increase of international students at DePauw encouraged students to establish the Cosmopolitan

Club in 1922 that sought to encourage closer relations between domestic and international students and included several Chinese student members. By 1926, there were 10 Chinese men and women in the DePauw student body, which made them the most populous international group on campus at that time. Although the future of Chinese students at DePauw seemed promising, the number of Chinese students at DePauw declined dramatically over the next few years (Phillips 2). In the 1930s and 1940s, relations between the United States and China diminished due to an outbreak of civil war in China and later World War II. The disruption was so severe that "little is known about the later careers of most of the 40-50 Chinese students who studied at DePauw in the preceding decades" (Phillips 2). China was essentially cut off from the rest of the world until the 1970s, which directly impacted Chinese students' ability to study abroad. It was not until 1978, almost 100 years after the first students came to the United States, that a new influx of Chinese students came to study at American universities.

After a decades-long hiatus, Chinese return to DePauw in 1986, with only one student enrolling during that year. This trend continued for many years, and as demonstrated by the graph, there was only a handful of Chinese students at DePauw between 1986 and 2006.



Significant changes in the number of international students from China occurred between 2007 and 2008, where the number of incoming students jumped from nine in 2007 to 26 in 2008.

According to DePauw, 2008 was a record not only for the number of students from China, but for international students as a whole. During this year, students from China were the greatest international population, followed by India and Vietnam. International students comprised 12% of the incoming class, a proportion that has fluctuated between 2008 and 2016, with a steady increase from 2016 to 2019. In 2016, 14% of the incoming class were international students, followed by 15% in 2017, 17% in 2018, and culminating in the highest proportion of international students in DePauw history in 2019 with 18.7% of the incoming class coming from countries outside of the United States. The number of students from China has also fluctuated, with a significant drop between 2018 and 2019, from 43 incoming students to only 15. However, this number only represents the number of incoming students, so the proportion of Chinese students on campus is still significant.

CHINESE STUDENT RELIGIOSITY

As more Chinese students have attended American universities, they have become a group that scholars are interested in studying. DePauw Chinese students are a part of this ever-growing population that have experiences and worldviews scholars want to understand and analyze. In fact, in the past few decades, scholars have started focusing more on the religiosity of young Chinese people and specifically Chinese university students. Yang describes these surveys and their findings:

> "According to one article (Zuo 2006), a 1998 survey found that 13.4 percent of college students in Beijing were religious believers; a 2000 survey found that 11.8 percent of college students in Shanghai were religious believers. The latest survey of college students in Shanghai (Huang et al 2009) finds that about 19 percent of the college

> students admitted to belief in religion, among them, 4.9 percent were Protestant Christian, 0.6 percent Catholic, 0.8 percent Muslim, 4.6 percent Buddhist, 0.8 percent Daoist, and 7.3 percent believing some kind of folk religious gods. The survey also reports that among those students without a religious identity, 67.5 percent expressed interest in religion, especially in Christianity and Buddhism, and only 10 percent of them said that they would never become religious believers. It also says that the proportion of Christians among college students is bigger than that of the general population and the majority of them converted after entering college" (Yang, Youth and Religion, 157).

These surveys were conducted in China and clearly found that although the percentage of religious believers was somewhat low and fell below 20%, it is clear that at least *some* Chinese college students were religious, and the number of youth who are believers is substantial. Additionally, it demonstrates that over two-thirds of the participants in the Huang et al survey expressed interest in religion. This shows that although they might not be religious, this generation has a more open-minded attitude toward religion and is curious to learn what they might not have been taught at home or in school.

INTERVIEW INSPIRATION AND FINDINGS

Chinese university students are an underrepresented population in the discussion of religion. However, as we have seen, they are an important group to analyze because they hold different attitudes than older generations. Thus, their perspective can add important findings to the larger conversation about Chinese religion. In the following section, we will discuss in greater depth Fenggang Yang's surveys at Purdue, which made significant contributions to the literature and greatly influenced this thesis. Furthermore, we will compare my interview findings

to the existing literature. I will argue that the interview findings strongly support a variety of conclusions from other scholars.

SURVEY OF CHINESE STUDENTS AT PURDUE

In addition to surveys about Chinese students in China, more surveys have been conducted about Chinese international students studying in the United States However, while many scholars have studied Chinese international students in the United States, "scholars have paid little attention to students' experience of religion" (Liu 124). Academic work done about Chinese international students had historically not discussed their religious identity or how they experience religion while studying in the United States. Furthermore, most surveys about Chinese religiosity focus on a wide range of Chinese people, and do not focus solely on the experience of Chinese international students who represent a younger generation who have more access to religious outlets. However, one specialist began focusing on Chinese international students studying in the United States. This study is worth investigating deeply because it is the most comprehensive collection of data about Chinese university student religiosity. As was previously mentioned, the studies conducted at Purdue served as an inspiration for this study, so a thorough analysis will aid in understanding it was so influential.

In 2016 and 2018, Fenggang Yang engaged in research projects that surveyed the Chinese students at Purdue University, where he is a professor of sociology and the founder of The Center on Religion and Chinese Society. Yang acknowledges the limitations of past research on Chinese religiosity when he states, "they tend to follow the conventional survey design of choosing only one religion among several given options. However, forcing respondents to choose a single religious identity may fail to capture people's religious life in modern society"

(Yang 23). Thus, his research still makes clear distinctions between Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, and folk religion as he asks participants about their "religious practices rather than about beliefs in abstract categories" (Palmer 19). In a study conducted in 2010, he asked questions such as "Do you worship in temples on the Chinese New Year,?" "Do you believe in ghosts,?" and "Do you burn incense to deities,?" as opposed to more general questions such as "What religion do you believe in?" By asking a new set of questions, he and his team discovered, "only about 15% of Chinese are strict atheists, while 85% of them do have some type of belief in supernatural entities," once again demonstrating that there is a religious element to the lives of many Chinese people, even if they do not associate as religious (Palmer 19). His use of a new strategy of asking questions was a breakthrough in finding much more accurate information about Chinese religiosity.

He continued to conduct research using this methodology in the aforementioned studies from 2016 and 2018, which focused on Chinese students at Purdue. His study of Chinese religiosity was a comparison of student perspectives before and after arriving in the United States where he documented changes in belief in Buddhism, Daoism, Protestantism, Catholicism, Islam, and folk religion. The survey also accounted for varied levels of belief, ranging from "Completely believe" to "Do not believe at all." In addition to overall beliefs, he asked about more specific practices associated with the major religions previously mentioned. He also asked students about their participation in "ancestor worship," "Buddhist activities," "Confucian activities," "Daoist activities," etc. Additionally, the survey also asked students what proportion of their peers know about their religious beliefs. Finally, Yang asked students about specific religious beliefs, including belief in elements such as karma, reincarnation, heaven, and hell.

His survey and the emphasis on asking about specific activities was inspiration for this study. The intention behind this study was to compare how students religiously self-identified versus the beliefs they held or practices they participated in. Thus, the interviews conducted in this study asked students about their beliefs *and* practices to determine if there are discrepancies between what a student believes in and what religious practices they actually participate in. My interview questions were inspired by an interest in collecting more information about how students religiously self-identify in comparison to if they agreed to have a belief in a religious element, such as karma. Some questions were also targeted at gathering young people's attitudes toward discussing religion with peers, their attitude toward those who *do* hold religious beliefs, and how education about religion is approached in the classroom. Finally, while it was not the focus of the study, students were asked about their attitude toward Christianity as it is rapidly growing in popularity in China. The intent of the interviews was to collect deeper information about the Chinese youth psyche that cannot be accounted for in surveys that only gather statistics. Rather, the interviews allow for a better understanding of what Chinese students think about religion based on their personal experiences. Names are not used to protect student privacy.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Students were asked if they had a religious belief and their reasons for having or not having one. The intent of asking this question was to determine if student responses aligned with previous findings that discovered most students, when asked if they are religion, will say no; however, when asked questions about specific beliefs or practices, typically many individuals will report they do hold some beliefs associated with religion. All of the students responded

saying they did not have a religious belief. This supports the previously mentioned findings reported by Yang, who found that less than 20% of students reported they had a religious belief (Yang, Youth and Religion). Interviewee responses supported the often-low response rate of religious self-identification. Furthermore, holding beliefs in religious elements like karma was typical of interviewees, which support the findings of Yang's Purdue study. There, he discovered that although students claimed to not be a religious believer, 35.9% of respondents believed in karma. Overall, while the interviews were more of a qualitative study, the responses of students aligned with many scholars' findings that Chinese youth identify as not having a religion yet believe in religious elements.

Another set of questions investigated what students remember learning about religion growing up. This was intended to shed light on the difference studies have found between the government's stance toward religion and the academic stance toward teaching it in the classroom. While the Chinese government is not completely tolerant of religion, the situation in many Chinese classrooms is more tolerant. In January 1992, "in his 'problems related to religious activities,' then Prime Minister Li Peng… [expressed the] separation of religion and education" (Nanbu 226). Although there is a separation of religion and schooling, religion is still taught, but typically under the subjects of history or geography. Interestingly, the textbook *Inhabitants of the World* states, "In China, the majority of ethnic Han people do not believe in religion" (Nanbu 229). So, while Chinese students are learning about religion, they are subconsciously being reminded that most Chinese people are not religious, which in turn could affect the way they perceive their own religious identity and the identity of others. I asked students if they remember being taught about religion in school. It appears as though Nanbu's analysis of religion in China being taught more as a subject of history than a discussion about

personal beliefs is corroborated by student interviews. Interviewee 1 stated that religion was taught in history and geography class where students were taught about how the different religious groups are typically associated with certain regions. Her memory of learning about religion in the context of history reaffirms Nanbu's analysis of junior high textbooks. Other interviewees similarly mentioned learning about religion in the context of Chinese history. Nanbu states that, "in Chinese education, although religious education understood as imparting the values of a particular religion does not take place, religious education defined broadly as acquiring knowledge of religions does occur" (Nanbu 233). Students are not necessarily taught the specific beliefs of each tradition, but their origins, typical regions in which they are popular, and the number of believers worldwide. It does appear that schools are still teaching students to believe in science and Marxism instead of religion, which aligns with China's official socialist political stance and the belief that "religion is supposed to wither away as socialism is established" (Overmyer 1). Nanbu's findings about the context in which religion is taught in China was supported by what interviewees remember being taught in school, demonstrating that religion is not an unspoken topic, but nevertheless is taught on a surface level that does not teach or promote value systems associated with each religion.

Thus, while government policies are stricter than educational policies in many situations, the classroom seems to be a more religiously tolerant place. In recent decades, as more and more Chinese people turned or returned to religion, Chinese society's outlook on religion has transformed from denial and suppression to a more tolerant and accepting attitude. Learning about the world's religions in the classroom may have impacted the students' responses as many students reported that they did not have their own religious belief, but the common trend was that they viewed religion positively and were respectful toward religious believers. In fact, studies

have been conducted about the connection between education level, age, and tendency to be religious or tolerate religion. One particularly relevant study was conducted by Jeremy E. Uecker, where he focused on education and religion in China because he believed it to be an understudied area. One explanation he has for a low rate of religious belief in young Chinese students is that they may be too focused on the college entrance exam, which is incredibly demanding and time consuming. Students may be so focused on preparing that they have no time to develop their personal beliefs. Additionally, in school, students are still taught "Marxism and atheism, which may undermine students' personal religious commitment and shape their attitudes toward religion more generally" (Ueker 159). This may be the case for students in primary and secondary school, but the relationship with level of education and religiosity becomes more complicated as students get older and encounter more forms of education.

Students who study abroad are often exposed to a religiously diverse context, which in turn increases their familiarity with religion. Ueker claims that students who are put in more religiously diverse environments are provided "the opportunity for... more tolerant religious attitudes to develop" (Ueker 163). One interviewee stated that since coming to the United States for high school her attitude changed quite a lot. She stated, "I do look at it from a different perspective because I formed this positive image of people who are religious. After getting to DePauw I learned a lot about not judging people based on their experience or what they believe in. I think it's great to keep my mind open, so a person who is religious or not, it doesn't really matter to me." The opportunity for this student to study abroad and be immersed in a religiously diverse context caused her attitude towards religion to change to become more tolerant, which appears to affirm Ueker's assertion.

In addition to the Chinese education system's influence on religiosity, Liu Jinguang provides a historical and social analysis of why Chinese people may not hold their own beliefs but are tolerant of others. She believes that traditional Chinese culture shaped religions--both native and non-native--and that the tolerant beliefs of the religions also shaped the culture. She references the tolerant nature of all of the religious traditions, even though they have different interpretations of peace and tolerance. For example, Buddhism believes in nonviolence and non-killing of all living things because all living things are equal, which in turn implies that there should be "peaceful coexistence between societies, nations, and people" (Liu 206). Additionally, Taoism believes in the relationship between humans and nature, and calls for human beings to adopt the laws of nature and live peacefully with their surroundings. Consequently, Taoists and ideas from Taoism result in a tolerant and peaceful worldview. Even Christianity, an imported religion, has caused Chinese Christians to call for "harmony with [heaven], harmony with the people, harmony with the society" (Liu 206). Overall, all of the major religions in China support peace and tolerance, which has caused Chinese society to also emphasize tolerance. While an individual may specifically be a Buddhist or Taoist or a follower of any of these traditions, the tolerant worldview they all hold -- in their own ways -- has become embedded in the culture, and therefore affects the mindset of a significant number of Chinese people. Thus, many Chinese people have this same tolerant worldview, which is certainly one aspect of understanding why so many young Chinese people accept and respect the beliefs of religious people.

A significant amount of the literature acknowledges the divide between religious practice and belief. A very clear example of the disconnect between practices, beliefs, and self-identity was when Interviewee 2 told me about her grandma. She stated, "My grandma she kind of believes in Buddhism and she does all of the religious practices…but I'm not sure if that's a

believer." In other words, she does all of the things a religious practitioner would and genuinely believes in the doctrines but would not call herself a Buddhist. However, the student said "that's very normal in China. I think everyone [is] influenced by these religions very deeply." This seemingly contradictory understanding of religion supports much of the existing literature, but it certainly begs the question why her grandmother and many others (including the interviewee) participate in religious practices and have religious beliefs, but do not say they are believers.

EXPLANATION FOR STUDENT REACTIONS

In this final section, I will provide a series of analyses that explain why students say they are not religious believers but hold religious beliefs or have participated in religious practices. First, we will return to the discussion of the word "religion" and how scholars were influenced by Western modernization, which caused them to conclude that religion was a negative thing in society. Next, I will address multiple psychological approaches to understand how religious elements in society have impacted the Chinese worldview. Finally, we will revisit the conversation of the interconnected nature of Chinese religions as an explanation for why Chinese people may not identify as a follower of only one tradition. These explanations help us understand why the literature and the conducted surveys have found an internalized religiosity amongst respondents.

EARLY CHINESE SCHOLAR HOPES FOR SECULARIZATION

Returning to the conversation of early Chinese scholars, one of the major reasons why scholars shunned religion was in an attempt to follow the Western belief that modernization required secularization. The same group of scholars from the early twentieth century that shared

their opinions that China lacked religion was also influenced by outside factors. In addition to discrepancies over the use of the term "religion", "many intellectuals became enthralled with the rationalism of the European Enlightenment. Consequently, the study of religion by Chinese scholars was profoundly shaped by this Western 'scientific' perspective" (Lizhu 92). As a result, scholars adamantly rejected the existence of religion in Chinese culture to demonstrate that China was modern and therefore secular. For example, the philosopher Qian Mu wrote about Buddhism, but claimed that Buddhism was, in fact, not a religion in the typical understanding of the word. He stated, "the spirit of Buddhism is similar to that of Chinese culture. Although it may be called a religion, its object of faith is an internal Buddha or Bodhisattva, rather than an external God...Therefore, Buddhist belief seems to begin and end with human beings. We might say that Buddhism is a religion based in humanity" (Lizhu 93). He attempted to remove the religious elements of Buddhism by rejecting the external spiritual nature of the Buddha. He simultaneously focused on the human elements of Buddhism, which minimizes the spiritual aspects of Buddhism. Qian Mu is just one example of this early generation of scholars who, "under the influence of Western culture, believed that China's lack of religiousness might well be an advantage in an era of secularization and modernization" (Lizhu 92). The writings of this group of Chinese scholars claim that Chinese ideologies are not actually related to religion, all of which was an attempt to follow the lead of the West. In order to truly modernize, these scholars believed that religion should be eradicated from society in order to make true progress. Although these scholars made their impact on society a century ago, their influence was the catalyst for many anti-religious movements, which have all affected the religious situation in China today and the mindset many Chinese people hold. Anti-religious sentiments from decades are still

embedded into Chinese culture and politics today, and surely have affected the mindset of many young Chinese that are raised with these cultural attitudes toward religion.

"PSYCHOLOGICAL DEFICIT"

In addition to a historical and political background of why students may be inclined to state they are not religious, there are also psychological explanations. One scholar, X. M. Zhang, used the term "psychological deficit" to explain typical responses of Chinese university students when they are asked about their religious beliefs. He claimed that this "psychological deficit" included a combination of features of contemporary Chinese college students, which he listed as follows:

> 1) randomness of belief; when they choose religions, they focus on form rather than essence, outward appearance rather than inner meaning, lacking directionality, 2) utilitarianism of belief; they usually ask for religious support for practical problems, such as entering a higher school, emotional frustration, and suffering pain, 3) religious motivation of helplessness; they may subconsciously send a signal to God for help in the case of despair, hoping God can help them out of trouble, 4) pluralism of religious beliefs; driven by the mindset of "trying everything," they are interested in all kinds of religions, but they seldom focus their interests on a certain religion (Chen 644-45)

This "psychological deficit" is a term used in the sphere of psychology, but in this case was applied to Chinese student religiosity specifically. The features he identified were found in many students' responses. For example, students referenced that it was typical for Chinese people to lean on religious support when they were wishing for something such as good grades. Interviewee 2 specifically referenced going to a Buddhist temple to pray for future academic

success and to use Zhang's language "practical problems." She stated, "I [just] hope my family will be healthy ...and [my parents' work goes well] ...When I was applying to colleges here, that year around April or March I went to a temple that is famous for…读书 (studies). I went to that temple with my family and prayed, like, hope I can get into a good school and get good grades." This example directly supports Zhang's second proposal "utilitarianism of belief" claiming that students may turn to religion and prayer when hoping for something more practical. Furthermore, students seemed interested in learning more about religion, but did not have a specific religion they wanted to learn more about. Rather, it was a general interest in religion or finding multiple traditions appealing. In my surveys, I found more evidence to back up Zhang's claims that Chinese college students have a utilitarianism of belief and a pluralism of religious beliefs.

RELIGIOUS IDEAS IN POPULAR MENTALITY

Overmyer describes how religious elements particularly from Buddhism have become ingrained into the Chinese psyche, stating that "ideas of karma and rebirth have influenced Chinese literature and popular mentality" (Overmyer 5). Religious elements of various traditions have become so embedded in the Chinese culture that they are subconsciously "believed" by a majority of Chinese people. For example, the idea of karma is a religious element from Buddhism that many Chinese people believe in, although they do not identity as Buddhist. This originally religious concept has become integrated into Chinese culture. Although rooted in a religious tradition, it has transformed into a moral code as Chinese people use this concept of "what goes around comes around" as motivation for living a morally good life. While many are not motivated to go moral things because of a religious calling, the ethical guidelines many

follow in fact stem from core beliefs of religious traditions. Thus, many Chinese people do not *believe* in religion, but religious elements are subconsciously impacting the worldview of some Chinese people. It is not appropriate to label these people as "religious" considering they do not identify as religious; however, they are impacted by a set of morals that is deeply impacted by religious concepts such as karma. This concept was further explained by Chen who "proposed that the views of heaven and destiny and the worship of spirits and gods were the main psychological features of religion among the common people…[which was] the result of a combination of the ideas of the three religions," Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism" (Chen 644). While a majority of people do not join formal religions, he claims that "an eclectic Chinese traditional culture made up of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, as well as witchcraft and superstition, has developed" (Chen 44). Thus, the traditional Chinese culture has become a significant influence on the modern Chinese secular or irreligious mindset.

As previously mentioned in the research findings section, one student seemed quite aware that Chinese society has religion naturally ingrained in the culture; she stated that "in my family, we won't say [we are] a Buddhism believer…but a lot of people do the religious practice subconsciously. It's already in [our] blood" (Interviewee 2). It appears that some young Chinese are even aware of this internalized sense of religion and have an understanding of how growing up in this culture has impacted their morality and decision making. Religious elements that have been ingrained into Chinese culture provide a strong explanation as to why individuals believe in religious elements but do not believe in the religious tradition those elements come from. In this case, the interviewee was primarily referring to elements of Buddhism, but the same is true for Confucianism and Daoism. Chinese people who adhere to Confucian values are not engaging in morally good behavior because they are religiously inspired to do so, but rather, elements of

Confucianism are ingrained into Chinese society. This causes people who grow up in that society to subconsciously follow these moral guidelines simply because they are a part of the culture. So, while an individual may not identify as a Confucian or a follower of any other religious tradition, they may hold beliefs that align with a religion. The following section will discuss in greater depth the integration of Daoism into the Chinese psyche and how it, too, has become an internalized religion.

"TAO OF CHINESE THOUGHT"

It was previously discussed that Daoism has had a significant impact on Chinese society, but psychologists have made a much more specific connection between Daoism and the way Chinese people see the world, and in this case see religion. This phenomenon is referred to as the "Tao of Chinese thought" or "naive dialecticism," which was originally coined by cultural psychologist Kaiping Peng. He explains that Daoism has become ingrained into Chinese society and has therefore made a deep impact on the Chinese psyche. He concludes that the Western thought process and the Chinese thought process are very different, which when applied to the case of religion can help us understand the apparent contradiction between not identifying as religious but believing in religious elements or participating in religious practices. For example, in a study Peng found that "the Chinese not only used more concrete self-descriptions, but more changeable, contradictory, and holistic statements when describing the self" (Peng 255). These findings and the findings of my study can be explained by the integration of Daoist principles in the minds of many Chinese people. What Peng describes as the "principle of change" refers to the Daoist belief that reality is in constant flux and does not stand still. The "principle of change is the logical foundation of naive dialecticism: The notion of change leads to a belief in

contradiction, and contradiction comes as a result of a belief in change (if all phenomena in the universe are constantly changing, then what is true today may not be true tomorrow). Holism, in turn, is the consequence of a belief in change and contradiction" (Peng 255). The mindset of many Chinese people is impacted by Daoist thoughts, which helps explain why students responded in ways that appear contradictory, primarily that students stated they were not religious believers but believed in religious elements. To a Western audience, these responses seem incompatible, but the Chinese psyche does not see a contradiction between these two statements. Peng states, "The key difference is that the Chinese naïve dialecticism denies the reality of true contradiction, and never sees those contractions as logically opposite" because they accept the unity of opposites (Peng 256). Once again, this idea of opposites working together comes from Daoism and the belief that life is complex and full of contradiction.

Overall, the reason for the difference in thinking can be contributed to vastly different folk epistemologies, which have impacted both groups for hundreds if not thousands of years. Chinese folk epistemology is strongly impacted by Daoist thoughts. In fact, Peng references a study analyzing Chinese proverbs that found that "close to 20% were found to be Taoist in nature" (Peng 252). While Confucianism may have impacted social life and the way that families, society, and the government became organized, Daoism had a greater impact on Chinese mentality and worldview. After all, as Chinese philosopher Hsu Dao-jing stated, "'The Tao has become the core of Chinese cultures, the beliefs of Chinese people and the foundation of Chinese societies'" (Peng 249). The Tao of Chinese thought is not a discussion of whether the American or Chinese way of seeing things is better, but simply a psychological explanation for why students may have answered the way they did.

Peng articulates the importance that one worldview is not superior to the other by referring back to the traditional symbol of Daoism: yin and yang. This symbol alone helps us understand how Daoism has affected the Chinese psyche. He states, "The wave shapes reflect continual movement, which [represents] the principle of change. The principle of contradiction is represented by the fact that there is a white spot inside the black shape, and a black spot inside the white shape…" The principle of holism is apparent because this symbol can only be appreciated holistically as one sees how the yin and yang work together (Peng 259). He goes one step further to claim that the American way is more like yang due to its forceful and linear approach while the Chinese way is more like yin because it is more tolerant and flexible. Thus, he concludes that, "the ideal state or ultimate strength of human thinking should be a combination of both yin and yang, a synthesis of many different ways of thinking" (Peng 259). The Tao of Chinese thought is an important psychological addition to the discussion of why Chinese students hold certain attitudes toward religion.

INTERCONNECTEDNESS OF RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

Another element that provides an explanation for the rarity of a Chinese person exclusively identifying as a member of a religious group circles back to the interconnected nature of Chinese religious traditions. In their hundreds or thousands of years of history, neither

> "[Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, or the state religion] emphasized total conversion or an exclusive affiliation. These formations did not exist as congregations or churches; instead, they served the state and the people by providing ritual services, healing services, and moral education. Though people may have developed certain affiliations with some of these institutions, most would not identify themselves exclusively with anyone of them. An exclusive religious identity is foreign to a Chinese culture. Thus, to the extent that to "'be religious'" is understood in modern times as involving an exclusive religious identity, most Chinese would not see themselves as being religious." (Palmer 29)

An individual could believe in different aspects of these traditions or participate in activities related to multiple, all while not being forced to conform to merely one tradition. Therefore, when asked if they are religious, Chinese people are most likely not thinking about identifying as a member of a certain religious group, but rather they consider themselves irreligious because the beliefs they hold may not be categorized by one tradition.

Decades of scholars dismissing the existence of religion in China in combination with the lack of religion being seen in daily life has influenced the Chinese understanding of religion within their country and culture. Palmer eloquently summarizes this phenomenon when he states, "Religion is not something that is obviously visible; therefore, the Chinese connect their personal experience with the discourse on the absence of religion in China; and they employ this mixture of intellectual discourse and personal experience to interpret what the know of Chinese history and philosophy – an interpretation that tends to erase, obscure, or ignore their religious dimensions" (Palmer 19). From the first misuse of the term "religion," to the May Fourth Movement that engrained the unimportance of religion into the Chinese psyche to the destruction of religion during the Cultural Revolution and the stigma associated with "religion," many

elements have contributed to the fact that a majority of Chinese people do not consider themselves religious, yet engage in religious practices or hold religious beliefs. Nevertheless, these religious elements *do* exist, and DePauw students themselves have participated in religious activities and hold beliefs that I have argued correspond with traditional Chinese religions.

RISE OF CHRISTIANITY

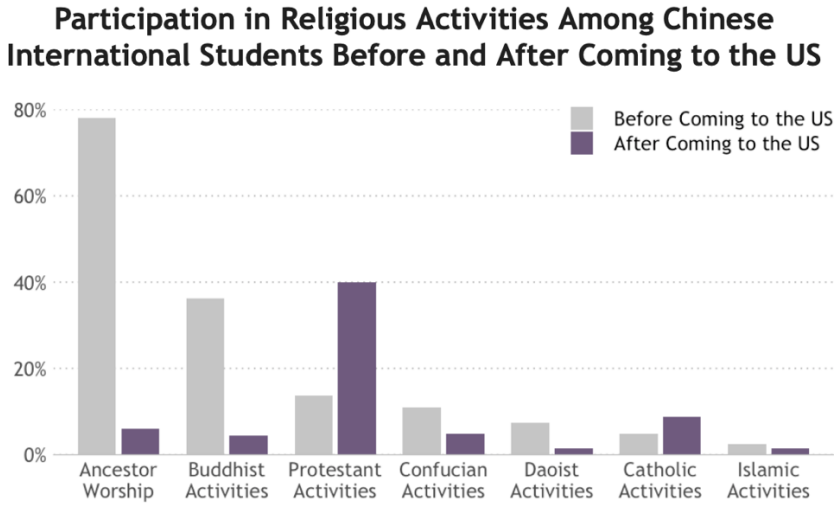
While the main focus of this project was to investigate traditional Chinese religions, discussing the growing popularity of Christianity is inevitable. Although Christianity has been in China for centuries, the real growth has not been until the last few decades. In fact, Fenggang Yang writing for The Association of Religion Data Archives states that from "1950 to 2010, the number of Christians in China increased from 4 million to 67 million" and 10 years from now, China is projected to have some 225 million Protestant Christians alone, a figure similar to the entire Christian population today in the United States" (Yang, ARDA). Many scholars have predicted that we will soon see more Christians in China than in the United States. Religion in general has re-flourished in China, yet it is Christianity that has proven to be the fastest growing faith. One interviewee was especially perplexed by the incredibly fast spread of Christianity in China. She told me that her grandma had recently converted to Christianity and said she was "shocked" to learn this information. Additionally, she brought up the increasing popularity of Christianity throughout the country and was very surprised that a foreign religion had gained so much traction in a country with an abundance of religious history. She stated, "I don't know how I feel about it. It's kind of awkward and weird. China, this land, has been Confucian, Daoist, and even Buddhist for thousands of years. And then suddenly Christianity came [to China] and it [just exploded]."

However, Yang provides a more historical explanation for why this trend may not be so surprising after all. He states that for many Chinese, "Christianity is associated with a modern society and modern values such as freedom and democracy" (Yang, ARDA). The association with modernity and growth is an explanation for why Christianity is becoming so widespread. On a more historical level, Yang believes that Christianity was able to gain a foothold based on the gap that was left from communal and rural life during the Cultural Revolution. In other words, many Chinese people were left with a sense of "alienation," and began searching for "a coherent system of meaning that was once supplied by communism," (Yang, ARDA). Christianity provided Chinese the opportunity to fill not only a religious gap, but also the social gap as the Christian congregation provides a community and support system. In contrast, Buddhism is more rooted in the individual experience as opposed to a communal experience, so perhaps that is why more Chinese have been drawn to Christianity over Buddhism. This analysis of the appeal of Christianity seems to apply particularly to older generations that sought to fill a void left by the Cultural Revolution (e.g. Yang's father converted to Christianity on his deathbed, so he has a personal connection to this religious growth). The turn to Christianity appeared to be true primarily for the interviewees' elderly family members, as multiple people referenced grandparents who had converted. However, Interviewee 5 also mentioned that one of her closest friends from home was Christian, so it is true also for some younger people; yet, she also stated that she believed her friend was "definitely in the minority," so Christianity may not be as popular among Chinese youth. Overall, although Christianity is not as embedded into Chinese culture as other religions, Yang's explanation for its growth makes it not quite as "shocking."

Many of my questions for students were about these traditional religions and practices and beliefs associated with them; however, some students voluntarily brought up Christianity as they had interacted with the religion itself or knew people in their lives who had converted to Christianity. Bringing up Christianity while discussing religion in general demonstrates that Christianity is an important element to their understanding of religion in China. Furthermore, these conversations showed that there is still a strong association between the term "religion," and the traditional view that religion should be structured like Christianity.

COMPARISON TO PREVIOUS FINDINGS

As was previously mentioned, Fenggang Yang's study at Purdue was a very impactful contribution to the study of Chinese international student religiosity. His approach to the studies was discussed as well as his findings about the discrepancy between religious identity and practice. However, his specific findings have yet to be analyzed and compared to the findings of the conducted interviews. While the statistics he found cannot necessarily be compared to a much smaller set of students represented in my study, the general trends he found are worth analyzing.



He found that "Before coming to the US, most respondents at least occasionally participated in ancestor worship (78%)" (Yang, 2018 Purdue Survey). Experience with ancestor worship was also common among interviewees, and multiple students reported praying to their ancestors on Chinese holidays. Yang found that after coming to the United States participation in ancestor worship and Buddhism dropped significantly, from 78% to 6% and from 36% to 5%, respectively (Yang, 2018 Purdue Survey). He also found declines in participation in Confucian and Daoist activities after coming to the United States. While my interviews did not track changes in frequency of religious practices, I did ask if students felt as though their attitude toward religion had changed since coming to the United States. None of the interviewees had converted to a new religion nor had they picked up new religious practices, but some had experience with Christianity. In some cases, students had become introduced to Christianity through host families or other Americans they had met. For example, Interviewee 7 stated that she went to a religious high school in the United States and went to church every week with her host family where they prayed together if something was wrong in the country or if family members were sick. Additionally, she attended chapel and would pray before final exams with her peers. However, even though she had been exposed to Christianity for years, she still stated that she "might be halfway into Christianity" because she did not agree with certain Christian beliefs about abortion or homosexuality. Instead, she agreed more with the idea of love thy neighbor, and even showed interest in learning more about the Bible. The interviewees did not report a change in their religious beliefs but mentioned more frequent interactions with religion or religious people.

The interviews also found that in some cases, the Marxist emphasis on pursuing science because religion is superstitious is still an ideology that is present in society and is therefore

affecting the opinions of some Chinese youth. For example, Interviewee 5 stated that back home in China "generally people consider religion as something that is not smart" because many believe that "science is opposite to religion." However, this is not necessarily universal because she referenced a science teacher from high school who taught them that many of the top scientists turn to religion at some point in their lives. While the impact of Marxist anti-religion is still present, and the interviewee believes that it is a commonly held view in China, there still may be a group that think the two can co-exist. She also re-emphasized the concept that while many Chinese people may not believe in religion, they also will not speak out against it, which indicates a more tolerant attitude held by Chinese people regarding others' religiosity.

LIMITATIONS

There are limits to this study because of the number of interviews and the selected group of interviewees. This selected group does not reflect the attitudes of all Chinese students at DePauw or all Chinese students at other universities, whether in the United States, China, or anywhere else. However, this study contributes to the existing literature by providing a more in-depth understanding of what some Chinese youth believe about religion. These findings are important because they demonstrate the disconnect between self-identity and specific beliefs, which is supported by the existing literature. This study also explored potential explanations for why students hold certain beliefs and how growing up in China has impacted their worldview. It is not a criticism of China, but rather an attempt to understand how China's complicated relationship with religion is specifically impacting the younger generations.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This project analyzed the historical, political, and academic background that led to the common understanding that China is a country without religion. Chinese scholars' comparison of Western religion to native Chinese religions caused them to assume that China had no religion. Furthermore, the desire for modernity and secularization led to two major anti-religious movements, The New Culture Movement and the Cultural Revolution. Decades of anti-religious rhetoric and policies made religion a politically sensitive topic, which caused many Chinese people either to hesitant admitting they are religious or to denounce religion altogether. However, the myth that China is a country full of irreligious people soon unraveled as more studies and surveys began to collect data about Chinese religiosity. At first, Western scholars found data that supported the original myth that China is a country without religion, but once scholars began to use the appropriate language, the data completely changed. Additionally, survey responses changed so drastically that Stark and Liu found that it was not possible for so many people to convert in such a short amount of time; instead, the social stigma against being religious gradually became a less intimidating factor for reporting a religious identity.

In addition to studies that already existed in the literature, student interviews were analyzed for how they related to previous findings. The interviews were inspired in part by Fenggang Yang's studies at Purdue, but they sought to discover a deeper understanding of the Chinese youth psyche as opposed to contributing additional statistics. The interviews supported many elements of the existing literature, first that science is still taught to be more important than religion, although religion is still taught as a subject. Furthermore, studies have shown that international students who are immersed in a diverse religious environment are more likely to be

tolerant of other religions, which was also supported by student interviews. Additionally, the disconnect between religious identity and belief was found in student interviews, which has been discovered in previous studies.

A variety of analytical approaches were used to explain both the findings in the existing literature and responses from students. First, a historical analysis demonstrated that the desire of early Chinese scholars to secularize in order to modernize may still impact the mentality of Chinese people today. The traditional or Western view that religion is structured makes many Chinese people believe that they are not religious. This may be due to the fact that they do not identify as being a member of a given religion or that they may hold beliefs associated with multiple traditions. Furthermore, a psychological analysis was used to demonstrate that many of the interviewees supported Zhang's proposal of a "psychological deficit" in Chinese college students being that many had interest in multiple religions and sought out religion for practical problems. Other socio-psychological analyses were used, which found that many religious or moral aspects of the main Chinese religious traditions have become embedded into the Chinese psyche, so that even if an individual says they are not religious, they may subconsciously hold beliefs associated with these traditions. Religious beliefs have become socially ingrained into Chinese culture, which has caused many Chinese people to grow up holding views that have religious elements to them. Overall, it was found that a combination of historical, political, and psychological factors has contributed to the common view of religion held by these Chinese youth.

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